

JACK YOUNGBLOOD

By Joe Horrigan
Courtesy of the Pro Football Hall of Fame

A few days prior to Super Bowl XIV, Los Angeles Rams General Manager Don Klosterman was asked to comment on defensive end Jack Youngblood, who despite having a fractured left fibula played every defensive down in the NFC title game a few days earlier. Klosterman replied that Jack was “a throwback,” meaning that he was much like the legendary players of old who thought nothing of playing in pain.

Youngblood, when told of the remark, jokingly snapped back, “He called me that? You know what a ‘throwback’ is down home? It ain’t a keeper.”

Obviously, that wasn’t Klosterman’s meaning, and equally obvious was that Youngblood was aware of the team GM’s intent. It was simply Jack’s folksy way of diverting praise.

High praise was something Youngblood received on numerous occasions during his 14-year career with the Rams. Consider that the 6-4, 247-pound defensive end was a first- or second-team all-pro selection eight times, a first- or second-team All-NFC pick nine times, selected to play in seven consecutive Pro Bowls, was named the league’s defensive Most Valuable Player in 1975, and the Rams’ MVP three times.

More recently, on January 27, 2001, the day after his fifty-first birthday, Youngblood was bestowed the highest form of praise a pro football player can hope to achieve, election to the Pro Football Hall of Fame. It was an honor of which he dreamed since his retirement in 1984, and one he accepted in typical fashion, with dignity and humility.

Herbert Jackson Youngblood, III was born on January 26, 1950 in Jacksonville, Florida. When he was six, his family moved to Monticello, a small rural town along the Georgia border. Four years later, Jack’s father, Herbert II, passed away, leaving his mother, Kay, to raise Jack and his two sisters.

“Everyone in the county knew him,” Jack remembered of his father. “Everybody was his friend. He owned a service station, and I used to go there and piddle around – pump some gas, get in the way.” His death left an obvious void in Jack’s life. Fortunately, the void was in some ways filled by other males in his life.

“I had a good relationship with my high school coach, and then the man who was like my father all through

college, Wes Whiddon...and of course my grandfather. He raised me from like 10 to 15. The old man was a sheriff for 28 years and he had a certain masculine, dominating ways about himself that I guess I picked up.”

Despite, or perhaps because of his humble beginnings, Youngblood developed great pride in himself as well as a keen sense of humor. “I think its part of it,” he told an interviewer. “You learn to kid around and joke and not take things too seriously because somehow its all gonna work out for the best – or you’re gonna make it work out.”

Although Jack played center, guard and linebacker at Jefferson County High School, his quickness on defense drew the most attention. As a result, he became the team’s starting middle linebacker. His senior year, Jefferson went 10-1-1 and won the Florida State Class B Championship.

His plans for a football future at that time extended no farther than perhaps playing for a nearby junior college. “One day, though, I was asked if I’d like to go to the University of Florida and become a Gator,” Youngblood recalled. “Sure enough, it wasn’t long until I got a call, telling me I had a scholarship there. It was the only scholarship offer I had and, believe me, I jumped at it.”

From a 6-4, 190-pound linebacker, Jack grew heavier, and his play became more polished under defensive line coach Jack Thompson, who moved Youngblood to the defensive end position. Each year at Florida was better than the preceding one. In 1970, his senior year, Jack earned first-team All-America honors from The Sporting News and the Football Writers Association and played in the Senior Bowl and College All-Star games. That same season he was also named the Most Valuable Defensive Lineman in the Southeast Conference.

"I really went all out in college," Youngblood said. "By that time I was thinking a little about pro ball and hopeful that someone would draft me . . . Boy, I'll tell you, when the Rams drafted me No. 1, it surprised me. I was walking on air for days."

Youngblood wasn't expected to be a starter right away with the Rams since the team already had two capable ends in Coy Bacon and future Hall of Famer Deacon Jones. However, a foot injury to Jones kept him out of three games in 1971, and opened the door for the raw rookie. The Rams won all three games in which Jack started, defeating the San Francisco 49ers 20-13, the Atlanta Falcons 24-16, and the Detroit Lions 21-13.

The rookie's more-than capable play enabled the Rams to trade the veteran Jones to the San Diego Chargers the following season.

"Deacon Jones has been the most inspirational person in my football career," Youngblood said in a 1972 interview. "He took me under his wing when I first came to the Rams and taught me everything – his technique in the pass rush, how to play off blockers, and how to make the big play."

Replacing a legend left Youngblood with mixed emotions. "I remember when I started in place of Deacon in last year's first game in San Francisco," he told a reporter. "I felt like I was taking a part of him away."

In his second season, Youngblood shared the left defensive end spot with Fred Dryer. Then in 1973, Dryer moved the right side and Youngblood took sole possession of the left side.

Another future Hall of Famer, Merlin Olsen, was also influential in Youngblood's transition from college football to the pros. "It's unbelievable how many things I've learned from Merlin Olsen," he once reflected. "Merlin really taught me how to concentrate, that you play each play as if it were the only play. And if you put all the plays together like that, then you'll come out on top."

Although having teammates like Jones and Olsen to learn from surely contributed to his rapid development, Youngblood quickly developed his own distinct style of play. A strong believer in weight training – "one of the physically strongest men on the team" according to Rams' defensive coordinator Ray Malavasi – Jack combined speed and technique with his superior upper-body strength to overpower or get past offensive linemen.

Youngblood's physical assault on the opposition was also complimented by a verbal assault for which he became notorious. According to Cleveland Browns defensive tackle Jerry Sherk, Youngblood was "the master of sweet talkers." Sherk particularly remembered a game in which Youngblood was playing opposite the Browns' Barry Darrow. "Youngblood would say, 'You almost got me that time Barry,'" Sherk recalled. "Or 'You're doing a heckuva job,' Barry really thought he was – until he realized Youngblood had sacked our quarterback four times!"

Although he admits to doing a fair share of talking, Youngblood insists that he rarely jawed at offensive linemen. "I don't talk much to offensive linemen in general," he offered. "We're all the same breed, you know. Yeah, I try to intimidate the quarterbacks by yelling at them...If the quarterback's got sensitive ears and hears me, I like that."

Since sacks weren't an official NFL statistic until 1982, exactly how many times Youngblood got to the quarterback is unclear. Unofficially, according to one independent researcher, Youngblood amassed 151.5 sacks during his career, which at the time of his retirement would have been second all-time, behind only Deacon Jones. But Youngblood was more than just a master of the sack. He was a complete player. In fact, early in his career he played in a system that emphasized stopping the run first and disrupting the passer second.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 23, No. 3 (2001)

One of the best examples of his all-around ability was his performance in the 1975 playoff game against the St. Louis Cardinals. In that game he recorded a sack, forced a fumble, blocked an extra-point attempt, and returned an interception 47 yards for a touchdown.

“Good luck is a residue of preparation,” he humbly offered, trying to explain his touchdown run. “You have to be prepared for things like that and I think the coaches here have worked very hard getting us ready for everything under the sun.”

“He’s the best in football,” said Cardinals offensive tackle and future Hall of Famer Dan Dierdorf, who was matched up against Youngblood that day. For Youngblood, the tribute must have been especially gratifying since Jack often cited Dierdorf, the Dallas Cowboys’ Rayfield Wright, and Ron Yary of the Minnesota Vikings as the three toughest offensive tackles he had to face during his career.

The match-up between Yary and Youngblood often drew media attention as both players were recognized as among the best in the game, and often when they met, the game had playoff implications. One writer suggested in a 1976 article that, “When they play against each other, the concussion waves bounce off the walls.”

During Youngblood’s tenure with the Rams, the team played in five championship games and advanced to Super Bowl XIV following the 1979 season.

It was that season that Jack probably received the most attention from the media, and earned a place in NFL folklore, not because he recorded 16 unofficial sacks, but because of a broken bone in his leg.

In the second quarter of the divisional playoff game against Dallas, Youngblood suffered a fractured left fibula after he fell over his old nemesis Rayfield Wright. “It was extremely painful,” he recalled. “But, being in the post-season playoffs, which are so hard to get to, it was a fear that I would never have that opportunity again . . . and I wanted to go out and help my teammates, no matter what the cost.”

Despite the injury, Youngblood not only finished the Dallas game, he continued, with the aid of a fitted brace, to play through the playoffs and into the Super Bowl.

Although it was the most publicized of the durable defensive lineman’s career, it was not the most serious. In 1978, Jack suffered a pinched nerve in his left shoulder that caused him to lose more than 50 percent use of his arm. It was an injury that lasted until the spring of 1981, and one that gave Jack the scare of his life.

As it turned out, the shoulder injury had also damaged a vein and an artery and eventually resulted a life-threatening blood clot. The doctors, after surgically removing a hotdog-sized clot, suggested that Jack might not play again. Obviously they didn’t know Jack Youngblood. “Jack doesn’t have a high threshold of pain; he has no threshold at all,” then-Rams trainer Gary Tuthill remarked.

The Rams’ defensive captain, Youngblood always answered the bell. He played in a Rams’ record 201 consecutive games, missing just one game and that came in 1984, his final season.

“A future Hall of Famer, the John Wayne of pro football,” is what then-St. Louis Cardinals head coach Jim Hanifan called the 14-year veteran after a game in which he sacked the Cards quarterback three times and blocked the potential tying field goal on the game’s last play.

Even in his fourteenth and final year in the league, Youngblood was a dominant player. “I think Jack Youngblood is the best football player I’ve ever been around,” an admiring coach John Robinson said of his star player. “He is truly special.”

In an effort to describe Youngblood, one veteran observer wrote, “Jack Youngblood plays football the way my eight-year-old daughter licks frosting bowls. It might not be religion, but it’s close, and obviously enjoyable.”

Throughout his career, Youngblood drove himself almost relentlessly to live up to the high standards he had set for himself. But a back injury finally forced him to hang up his cleats and retire.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 23, No. 3 (2001)

"Football has been my life for as long as I can remember," he told the attendees at his retirement press conference. "But it's too important to me to go on if I can't continue to play as I once did."

There's no doubt that Jack Youngblood was, as his former general manager pointed out, a "throwback" to another time. But, as he proved time and time again during his Hall of Fame career, he was definitely a "keeper."

JACK YOUNGBLOOD

Defensive End

Youngblood, Herbert Jackson III

6-4, 247

College: Florida

High School: Jefferson Co. [Monticello, FL]

Born: January 26, 1950, Jacksonville, FL

Drafted: 1971 Round 1 LARm

Year Team GM

| | | |
|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| 1971 LARm 14 | 1976 LARm 14 | 1981 LARm 16 |
| 1972 LARm 14 | 1977 LARm 14 | 1982 LARm 9 |
| 1973 LARm 14 | 1978 LARm 16 | 1983 LARm 16 |
| 1974 LARm 14 | 1979 LARm 16 | 1984 LARm 15 |
| 1975 LARm 14 | 1980 LARm 16 | |